**Davtyan Karine**

**British humour vs Russian humour**



**Contents**

Introduction

British humour

Stereotypes, or How to understand British humour

Themes and genres in British humour

Conclusion I

Russian humour, its genres and themes

Conclusion II

So, is there anything similar?

**Introduction**

Humour. Can a human creature live without it? It seems to be impossible as long as we can find a great variety of forms and images of this phenomenon in different cultures and traditions. People use it, consciously or uncunsciously, to relax, to break the ice in communication or to bring some special information into the issue.

Being one of the most curious inventions of our Creator, humour continues to be part of the most important and significant characteristics of a person, a culture, a nationality. It is often said that it is hard to deal with a man without a sense of humour! Sometimes we can hear that some natuonality has a "specific kind of humour". And lots of examples can be found in the history of nations when the sense of humour helped people to survive in extremely difficult circumstances.

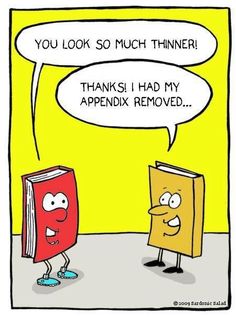
Humour differs depending on geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, intelligence, the history of the nation, social values, traditions and ideology. So, let us find what is similar and what is different in the humour of two glorious nations, the British and the Russians.



**British humour**

First of all, what is humour? The quotation by John Cleese, one of the most famous symbols of British humour, represents it this way: “If I can get you to laugh with me, you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas. And if I can persuade you to laugh at the particular point I make, by laughing at it you acknowledge its truth.”

In general we may say, humour is "the quality of being amusing and comic"(according to the Oxford English Dictionary) and also it can be defined as a “type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex” (Encyclopædia Britannica Online). So, these two definitions give us a reason to assume that humour can be conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended. Also humour is in some way language specific: a language with many homophones or nearly homophones is qualified better for word plays than languages without many similar sounding words. But languages are able to build further word plays, which go beyond the purely phonological level.



In the English language we can find a great variety of examples illustrating these statements.

What people think of British humour? To my mind, a comprehensive definition of British humour was given by Leo McKinstry: "The famous British sense of humour has long been our most cherished national characteristic. We have valued it above historic military victories and great works of literature, above our rich scenic landscape and our talent for invention. Comedians, not generals or sports stars or scientists or politicians, are the truly loved public figures of Britain. We sneer at other countries, especially Germany, which we believe lack our gift for humour.

"He's a good laugh," is the warmest personal accolade any individual can receive from friends. Our ability to make a joke of anything is supposed to have seen us through wars and crises, saved us from revolution and political extremism."



But also it is sometimes said that "when it comes to making the British laugh, there is nothing more effective than a hearty insult or a good joke about something wholly inappropriate - like the war". The nation's obsession with sarcasm and self-deprecation has long been the source of bafflement to other nations, but now scientists have discovered just what makes their sense of humour so unique: is dictated by genes. Well, that's a very easy way to justify!

And surprisingly, Eddie Izzard, a famous multilingual comedian from the UK, says that "There is no 'British' humour. Why so? He's adamant: "It is only the references [that are specific] … you don’t need to nationalise it." Every country has different schools of comedy and the fault lines don’t fall along national borders: “There is a whole truck load of stuff in every country.” Probably because Mr. Izzard is an "exporter" of British humour in Europe and in the USA, who is trying to disrupt stereotypes of national humour, so he finds it overly sentimental, even arrogant, to insist that there is something unique about British humour.

Anyway, let us find out what these stereotypes are like before he destroys them!

**Stereotypes, or How to understand British humour**

Britain’s unique type of humor may seem baffling at first. Heavy on self-deprecation, almost undetectable sarcasm and constant deadpan delivery, British humor can feel like a whole new language. But, believe or not, it is quite easy to comprehend if to take a look at some basic human fears and needs.

### 1. Laugh at yourself



The key to understanding British humor is knowing not to take yourself too seriously. Their default humor is to highlight their own flaws. Britons make light of their failures so as to appear more humble, approachable and relatable. There is no room for egos in British humor. Awkward encounters, clumsiness and embarrassing moments are all well-established self-deprecation material.

**Examples:**

* “I’m really not very good at self-deprecation comedy.”
* “I look like I got dressed in the dark this morning!”
* “I’m so bad at cooking- I could burn water.”
* “I couldn’t run a bath, let alone this race. I make snails look speedy.”

### 2. Wait, were they joking?



Combine self-deprecation with a dose of understated sarcasm and you have the key ingredients of British humor. Sarcasm and irony are ingrained in their DNA. They are produced with world-class timing and nearly always with a deadpan delivery that will leave you wondering as to whether it was indeed a joke (or not?).

Sarcasm can be hard to spot in a new language and a new culture, and in Britain the usual clues of hyperbole (exaggeration) and an overemphasis on adjectives are stressed even less, making it harder to pick up. Luckily, sarcasm is used so often in day-to-day life that you will soon be a natural at detecting it. Be sure to use the tone, context and non-verbal clues such as the proud smile that spreads across the speakers face (Brits struggle to hide their delight at a perfectly timed sarcastic comment) as a guide.

**Examples:**

* “Oh, so you do know how to answer your phone?”
* “I absolutely love it when my train is delayed.”
* “I really like how loud you play your music.”

### 3. Don’t take what they say seriously



Brits are famous for being very, very polite, but a surefire sign that a Brit likes you is if they happily ‘offend’ you with the occasional witty, tongue-in-cheek comment. These are not mean statements, but rather a playful exchange of verbal sparring delivered with a smiling face and no apology. It can be used to make light of differences with new friends in an attempt to spark conversation.

A vital aspect of mastering British humor is judging what the people you are with find funny. A tongue-in-cheek comment is not always appropriate. It’s all about honing your humor to suit the occasion and place.

**Examples:**

* “How have you never seen Frozen?! What’s wrong with you?!”
* “I can’t be friends with someone who doesn’t drink tea!”
* “I can’t be seen in public with a Manchester United supporter!”

### 4. Brits find humor in almost everything



Brits use humor to lighten even the most unfortunate, miserable moments. There are few subjects they don’t joke about.  It’s not used to shock and offend but rather because Brits turn to laughter as a form of medicine when life knocks them and those around them down. Misfortune and failure are commonplace in British comedy – provided the jokes are in good taste (although ‘gallows humor’ is not uncommon). In most cultures, there is a time and place for humor. In Britain, this is not the case.

**Example:** “I tripped and fell over in front of everyone but at least I didn’t embarrass myself!”

**Themes and genres in British humour**

These were the keys to understanding what the British people laugh at and why. In addition, let us try to classify the themes and genres in British humour and figure out where they come from (examples of films, TV series and radio comedies are also given).

Wikipedia says: **British humour** was shaped by the relative stability of British society, and carries a strong element of satire aimed at "the absurdity of everyday life". Themes include the class system and sexual taboos; common techniques include puns, innuendo and intellectual jokes.

A strong theme of sarcasm and self-deprecation, often with deadpan delivery, runs throughout British humour. Humour may be used to bury emotions in a way that seems insensitive to other cultures. Jokes are told about everything and almost no subject is taboo, though often a lack of subtlety when discussing controversial issues is considered crass. Many UK comedy TV shows typical of British humour have been internationally popular, and have been an important channel for the export and representation of British culture to the international audience.

## Themes

Some themes that underpinned late 20th century British humour were:

### 1. Innuendo in British humour is evident in the literature as far back as Beowulf and Chaucer, and it is a prevalent theme in many British folk songs. Shakespeare often used innuendo in his comedies.

In the early 1930s, cartoon-style saucy postcards became widespread, and at their peak 16 million saucy postcards were sold per year. They were often bawdy, with innuendo and double entendres, and featured stereotypical characters such as vicars, large ladies and put-upon husbands, in the same vein as the *Carry On* films. Innuendo also features heavily in many British films and TV series of the late 20th century. The *Carry On* series was based largely on smut and innuendo, and many of the sketches of The Two Ronnies are in a similar vein. Innuendo with little subtlety was epitomised by Benny Hill, and the Nudge Nudge sketch by Monty Python openly mocks the absurdity of such innuendo.

By the end of the 20th century more subtlety in sexual humour became fashionable, as in *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and *Blackadder*, while *Bottom* and *Viz* continued the smuttier trend. In contemporary British comedy Julian Clary is an example of a prolific user of innuendo.

### 2. Satire: disrespect to members of the establishment and authority, typified by:

* *That Was the Week That Was (TW3)*, late night TV satire on BBC2 (1962–1966).
* *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, satirical sketch show, notable for launching the careers of Rowan Atkinson, Griff Rhys Jones, Pamela Stephenson and Mel Smith on BBC2 (1979–1982).

### 3. Absurd and the surreal, typified by:

* *Monty Python*, comedy troupe, originally noted for performing sketches without conclusions (1969–1983).

### 4. Macabre: black humour, in which topics and events that are usually treated seriously are treated in a humorous or satirical manner, typified by:

* *The League of Gentlemen*, a cult comedy revolving around the bizarre inhabitants of the fictional town Royston Vasey
* *Nighty Night*, a TV series about a sociopathic beauty therapist who fakes her husband's death in order to steal her disabled neighbour's husband

### Dr Rod Martin, a researcher, says that "the British may have a greater tolerance for a wide range of expressions of humour, including what many Americans might consider aggressively sarcastic or denigrating, like in Fawlty Towers and Blackadder." and claims that "Britons enjoy cruelty more than people from other countries."

### 5. Surreal and chaotic

* *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* (1990 and 1991) a parody of the variety shows which dominated the early years of television, but which were, by the early 1990s, falling from grace.
* *The Young Ones* (1982–1984), a British sitcom about four students living together. It combined traditional sitcom style with violent slapstick, non sequitur plot-turns and surrealism.

### 6. Adults and children: the 'war' between parents/teachers and their children, typified by:

* *Molesworth* books by Geoffrey Willans and illustrated by Ronald Searle
* *St Trinian's* books and films also originated by Ronald Searle

### 7. British class system, especially class tensions between characters; and pompous or dim-witted members of the upper/middle classes or embarrassingly blatant social climbers, typified by:



* *Jeeves and Wooster*, books by P. G. Wodehouse (later played by Fry and Laurie)
* *Fawlty Towers*, comedy TV series

Also, some comedy series focus on working-class families or groups, such as:

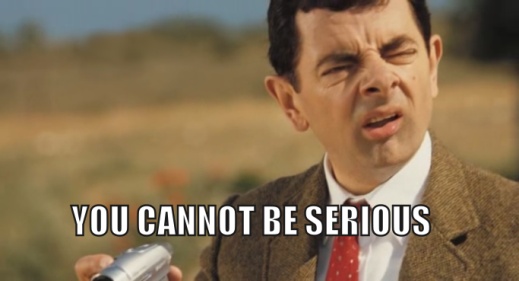
* *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*, sitcom
* *Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen* and *Coal Miner Son* sketches

### 8. Lovable rogue: often from the impoverished working class, trying to 'beat the system' and better himself, typified by:

* The *Andy Capp*, cartoon strip created by Reginald Smythe
* *The Likely Lads*, TV series

### 9. Embarrassment of social ineptitude, typified by:

* *Mr. Bean*, comedy TV series starring Rowan Atkinson



* *The Office*, comedy TV series starring Ricky Gervais
* *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, comedy series starring Michael Crawford

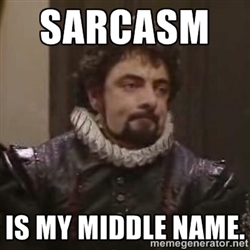
### 10. Race and regional stereotypes.

### The An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman joke format is one common to many cultures, and is often used in English, including having the nationalities switched around to take advantage of other stereotypes. These stereotypes are somewhat fond, and these jokes would not be taken as xenophobic. This sort of affectionate stereotype is also exemplified by *'Allo 'Allo!*, a programme that, although set in France in the Second World War, and deliberately performed in over the top accents, mocked British stereotypes as well as foreigners. This also applies to a lot of the regional stereotypes in the UK. Regional accent and dialect are used in such programmes as *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* and *Red Dwarf*, as these accents provide quick characterisation and social cues.



### 11. Bullying and harsh sarcasm, though with the bully usually coming off worse than the victim - typified by:

* *On the Buses*, Arthur toward his wife, Olive
* *Blackadder*, Edmund Blackadder toward his sidekick, Baldrick



### 12. Parodies of stereotypes making fun of British stereotypes, typified by:

* *Beyond the Fringe*
* *That Was the Week That Was (TW3)*, late night TV satire

### 13. Tolerance of, and affection for, the eccentric, especially when allied to inventiveness:

* Heath Robinson cartoons
* *Professor Branestawm* books

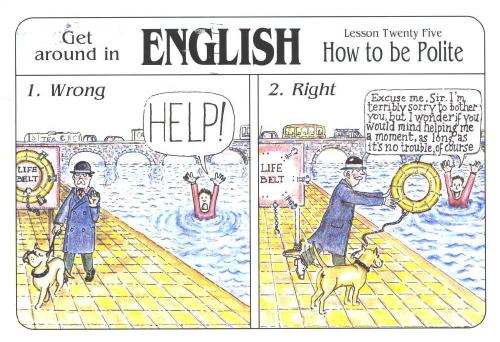
### 14. Pranks and practical jokes. Usually, for television, the performance of a practical joke on an unsuspecting person whilst being covertly filmed.

* *Game for a Laugh*
* *Trigger Happy TV*

**Conclusion I**

As we see it in popular culture, British humour is a somewhat general term applied to certain types of comedy and comedic acts from the United Kingdom. Many UK comedy TV shows typical of British humour have become popular all round the world, and, for good or bad, have been a strong avenue for the export and representation of British culture to an international audience, so that people can see: though the British are well known as very restrained it doesn't prevent them from joking. Their humour is very dry and ironic, but very curious at the same time. As people in Great Britain are obliged by society stereotyping to be polite, humour may cover their feelings and help them to express things in a roundabout way. It's a way of releasing repression and this is important for an average British character.

Of all the characteristics, good and bad, for which the British are known in the outside world, their sense of humour is one of the best-known and most positively regarded. To sum up, there are many different kinds of humour in British culture, and often culture and traditions of a person play a big part in how funny they may find something or not.



**Russian humour, its genres and themes**



When humour is an essential part of your own culture, it is not so easy to define its main characteristics and pecularities - you just share jokes with your friends, enjoy comedy TV shows and laugh at some funny things in Russian books, magazines and newspapers. But Russian humour, as well as the British one, has its own themes, genres and tendencies and, upon further examination, turns out to be quite unique.

We turn to Wikipedia one more time to find out which genres can be distinguished in Russian humour:

**1. Jokes.** The most popular form of Russian humour consists of jokes (anekdoty), which are short stories with a punch line. Typical of Russian joke culture is a series of categories with fixed and highly familiar settings and characters. Surprising effects are achieved by an endless variety of plots and plays on words.

**2. Toasts.** Drinking toasts can take the form of anecdotes or not-so-short stories, concluded with "So here's to..." with a witty punch line referring to the initial story.

**3. Chastushka**. A specific form of humour is chastushkas, songs composed of four-line rhymes, usually of lewd, humoristic, or satiric content.

**4. Black humour**. Apart from jokes, Russian humour is expressed in word play and short poems including nonsense and black humour verses, similar to some of the macabre "nursery rhymes" of Edward Lear. Often they have recurring characters such as "little boy", "Vova", "a girl", "Masha". Most rhymes involve death or a painful experience either for the protagonists or other people. This type of joke is especially popular with children.

*A little boy found a machine gun —*

*Now the village population is none.*

Since **jokes** is the most popular form of Russian humour, we would like to dwell on them more. Russian joke culture includes a series of categories with fixed and highly familiar settings and characters. Surprising effects are achieved by an endless variety of plot twists. Russian jokes treat topics found everywhere in the world, including sex, politics, spousal relations or mothers-in-law.

Every category has numerous untranslatable jokes that rely on linguistic puns, wordplay and the Russian language vocabulary of foul language.

First of all, archetypes is the basic and intrinsic part of Russian jokes. There are both named characters and different groups of people, including nations. As **named characters** we can specify historical fugures and fictional characters - these are Stierlitz, poruchik Rzhevsky, Rabinovich, Vasily Ivanovich (Chapaev), Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, Fantomas and the Golden Fish. None of them are just objects to make fun of but they become a suitable space to laugh at

* trains of thought:

*Stierlitz opens a door, and the lights go on. Stierlitz closes the door, and the lights go out. Stierlitz opens the door again; the light goes back on. Stierlitz closes the door; the light goes out again. Stierlitz deduces, "It's a refrigerator".*

Vyacheslav Tikhonov portraying Stierlitz



* a straightforward, unsophisticated and immensely rude officer whose rank and standing nevertheless gain him entrance into high society (Rzhevsky)
* an archetypal Russian Jew, who is a crafty, cynical, sometimes bitter type, skeptical about the Soviet government, and often too smart for his own good.

*Seeing a pompous and lavish burial of a member of the* [*Politburo*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politburo_of_the_CPSU_Central_Committee)*, Rabinovich sadly shakes his head: "What a waste! With this kind of money, I could have buried the entire Politburo!".*

Sholem Aleichem, a famous Rabinovich



* useless police forces that cannot catch Fantômas, a fictional criminal and master of disguise
* stupid and greedy fisherman (the Golden Fish).

Apart from the aforementioned ones, there is also **Vovochka** - the Russian equivalent of "Little Johnny". He interacts with his school teacher, Maria Ivanovna in a wisecracking, adult, often obscene way.

As **groups of people** we can specify new russians,



animals (portrayed as sapient beings with a stereotypical behavior), drunkards, policemen, ethnics (Chukchi, Ukranians, Georgians, Armenians, Estonians and Finns, Jews, Chinese and Russians themselves) and Russian military. Again, animals in Russian jokes are and were very well aware of politics in the realm of humans, in the case of the Golden Fish the Fisherman suffers from his own stupidity or greed, Policemen accept bribes (and are not considered to be very bright) - the same very actual themes for Russians to joke at.

Considering ethnical stereotypes, it must be said that imperial Russia had been multi-ethnic for many centuries, this situation continued throughout the Soviet period, and continues still. Most of all, Russians create jokes about national pecularities exaggerating some specific traits in their characters. So, Chukchi are depicted as generally primitive, uncivilized, and simple-minded, but clever in a naive kind of way.

*A Chukcha returning home from Moscow is met with great excitement and interest from his friends: "What is socialism like?" / "Oh," begins the Chukcha in awe, "There, everything is for the betterment of man... I even saw that man himself!" (a reference to the Communist slogan Всё для блага человека!, "Everything for the betterment of man").*



Ukrainians are depicted as rustic, stingy, and inordinately fond of salted *salo*; their accent, which is imitated in jokes, is perceived as funny.

Georgians are almost always depicted as stupid, greedy, hot-blooded, or sexually addicted, and in some cases, all four at the same time. A very loud and theatrical Georgian accent, including grammatical errors considered typical of Georgians, and occasional Georgian words are considered funny to imitate in Russian and often becomes a joke in itself. Armenians are often used interchangeably with Georgians, sharing some of the stereotypes. However their unique context is the fictitious *Radio Yerevan*, usually telling political jokes. Many other jokes are based on word play, often combined with the usage of a strong southern accent and consequent misunderstandings among the characters.

Estonians and Finns are depicted as having no sense of humor and being stubborn, taciturn, and especially slow. A special offer from Estonian mobile phone providers: the first two hours of a call are free.

*"I told some Estonian blokes that they're slow." / "What did they reply?" / "Nothing, but they beat me up the following day."*

Jewish humor is a highly developed subset of Russian humor, largely based on the Russian Jews' self-image. These Jewish anecdotes are not the same as anti-Semitic jokes. As some Jews say themselves, Jewish jokes are being made by either anti-Semites or the Jews themselves. Instead, whether told by Jews or non-Jewish Russians, these jokes show cynicism, self-irony, and wit that is characteristic of Jewish humor both in Russia and elsewhere in the world.

*A Red Guardsman pounds on Abram's door. / He answers through the door: "Yes?" / "Abram, we've come for everything precious." / Abram thinks for a few seconds, and calls out: "Rosa, my precious, someone's here for you!"*

Common jokes center on the enormous size of the Chinese population, the Chinese language and the perceptions of the Chinese as cunning, industrious, and hard-working.

Russians are a stereotype in Russian jokes themselves when set next to other stereotyped ethnicities. Thus, the Russian appearing in a triple joke with two Westerners, German, French, American or Englishman, will provide for a self-ironic punch line depicting himself as simple-minded and negligently careless but physically robust. Another common plot is a Russian holding a contest with technologically-superior opponents (usually, an American and a Japanese) and winning with sheer brute force or a clever trick.

## Linguistic quirks are very popular since there are lots of grammatical and linguistic oddities and irregularities in the Russian language.

### For every nation without exception there are some issues that are hard to comprehend and to go through and spheres of life that are not okay at the scale level. That is why they become part of national black humour which provides people relief in difficult circumstances. These include afterlife, Chernobyl, medicine, studentship and disabled. For instance, there is a series of jokes set in mental hospitals, some of which have a political subtext:

### *A lecturer visits the mental hospital and gives a lecture about how great communism is. Everybody claps loudly except for one person who keeps quiet. The lecturer asks: "Why aren't you clapping?" and the person replies "I'm not a psycho, I just work here."*



## Unfortunately, taboo vocabulary holds its special place in Russian humour. The very use of obscene Russian vocabulary, called *mat*, can enhance the humorous effect of a joke by its emotional impact. Due to the somewhat different cultural attitude to obscene slang, such an effect is difficult to render in English. The taboo status often makes *mat* itself the subject of a joke.

Another series of jokes exploits the richness of the *mat* vocabulary, which can give a substitute to a great many words of everyday conversation. Other languages often use profanity in a similar way, but the highly synthetic grammar of Russian provides for the unambiguity and the outstandingly great number of various derivations from a single *mat* root.

**Conclusion II**

Now we can see that Russian habit of having dismal face is just a manner. We are not gloomy inside at all, apparently we have a great sense of humour! Disposition to humour now and then can seem kind of paradoxical. Why are we laughing on where we should cry? Obviously it helps to survive - in a joke one can find a grain of vitally important persistence. Humour is being used as an "antidepressant" by Russian people since far from now. The whole dramatic history of Russia can be described if based on its humour. In conclusion, we would like to illustrate the life in Socialist state (some of these paradoxes still can be found in Russian reality):

*Nobody works, but the plan is always fulfilled. The plan is fulfilled, but the shelves in the stores are empty. The shelves are empty, but nobody starves; nobody starves, but everybody is unhappy; everybody is unhappy, but nobody complains; nobody complains, but the jails are full!*

**So, is there anything similar?**

As a matter of fact, different nations have a tendency to underline and even exaggerate their own pecularities in some spheres of life. And it is quite fair considering the fact that we live in a modern globalized world and it is rather important for every nation, regardless of whether it is young or old, to keep and save its own identity. But humans are humans everywhere. We have made this little research and found out that these two nations, Britons and Russians, have not less similarities in their humour than differences.

First of all, genres. They seem to be universal and very typical for both nations: these are word plays (or puns), satire (against the absurdity of life), parodies (imitating celebrities to undermine some illusions about them) and black humour. All of these same things show us that such different and distant nations use the languages that a very flexible for humorous distortions and live in conditions that include lots of difficulties and injustice.

Typical themes also reveal lots of coincidences: national stereotypes (especially language and speech), politics, self-deprecation or self-irony and obscenity. No doubts, there are different ethnic compositions and political systems in Great Britain and Russia, but, as we may see, these spheres continue to be very actual and debatable joking matters.

It is interesting to mention that the British people prefer to joke at themselves just in an ironic way emphasizing their weak points and laughing at them hard to negate, as long as Russians, even revealing something weak in a national character (such as laziness or stinginess), try at the same time to find something good(such as physical robust or mother wit) to compensate it.



Of course, there are some things that let us distinguish Russian and British humour: for example, Russians are not famous for neither intellectual jokes nor cruel ones and Britons don't have such a great variety of archetypes in their humour sphere. These can provoke difficulties and misunderstanding in cross-national exchange of jokes - if participants are not familiar with their interlocutors' cultures.

Anyway, humour itself can be called a sort of cure for every nation, irrespective of its geographical location, history or traditions. Some things are just a matter of preference: nothing can make Monthy Python funny if you don’t find it funny. By this rationale, some Russian jokes will never be funny to some people, regardless of their degree of assimilation into the Russian culture. Sometimes, however, it’s the quality of the joke or the quality of the delivery that makes all the difference – this rule is also universal for all cultures.

**List of references**

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_humour>
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_jokes>
3. <http://www.guidetorussia.org/russian-culture/russian-humor.html>
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_humour#See_also>
5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1581251/British-humour-dictated-by-genetics.html>
6. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/feb/05/eddie-izzard-force-majeure-tour-paris>
7. <http://www.grin.com/en/e-book/115357/the-funny-side-of-the-united-kingdom>
8. <http://www.oai.ru/britishcharacter.htm>
9. <http://ppt4web.ru/anglijjskijj-jazyk/umour-as-part-of-te-britis-national-culture.html>
10. <http://www.learnenglish.de/culture/britishhumour.html>
11. <http://www.ef.com/blog/language/beginners-guide-to-understanding-british-humor/>